Community failure: our worsening morass

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07 August 2008

Culture Change Letter #192, August 7, 2008

Loss of community cohesion and mutual support is the fatal self-inflicted wound of the dominant culture. To hear most commentators and politicians, we have so good a system and a caring, competitive citizenry, that we must simply agree on how we might extract more energy for continued mass production. Or how to assure that our corporate empire is not compromised by embarrassing torture policies. Neither of these debates addresses the source of the underlying problem we're immersed in.

The increasingly obvious failure of the U.S. and its global model is on many fronts, but it is not primarily technological or institutional. Rather, it is in human relations on the individual, family and neighborhood levels. If those levels were operating with true community (and not structured to disregard women, blacks and natives), then the greater levels of national and international would be taken care of.

While population growth seems to be the top threat facing the world today -- or, at least it exacerbates all threats to humanity and life on Earth -- we can say more than "overpopulation results in destruction of community." For perhaps overpopulation itself can be addressed by re-evaluating human relations in the community context.

It would be futile to try to solve overpopulation or restore community without dealing with the dominance of commerce and profit. The market has taken over our lives, and it's not just in the U.S. or the last few decades. Writing in 1933 in his novel Fruits of the Earth, Frederick Philip Grove described the effects of consuming and competitiveness earlier in the century in Canada's newly farmed western prairie. He traced the trend of lack of community to growing "progress":

"This orgy of spending had been enormously stimulated by the easy money of the flax boom; and the rate of expenditure was hardly retarded by the subsequent disaster of the slump. A standard of expenditure once arrived at is not so easily abandoned as established."

There is a creative nonprofit group called Community Solutions, tucked away in the little college town of Yellow Springs, Ohio. One could almost assign them the name Culture Change, and just as reasonably call Culture Change (the group publishing this essay) Community Solutions, because we have a similar analysis and set of "solutions" to society's ills involving energy and ways of living. The common denominator is that fostering community is essential for changing our culture. I would bet that both organizations strongly hold that top-down governmental "solutions" are in no one's interest except corporate industrialists' and bureaucratic technocrats'. After all, these outsiders are not of our respective communities.

After over twelve years of advocacy for transportation reform and sane land use, Culture Change found community to be quite weak in the "United Paved Precincts of America." In broadening and deepening our focus to address glaringly deficient values that society was stubbornly defending -- destruction of farmland, and greedy, unethical practice on all levels of society -- we dropped our main project, the Alliance for a Paving Moratorium. We paused to check our direction and see whether our Auto-Free Times magazine should continue as our main means of communication. We came close to shutting down and pursuing personal culture-changing activities, but we decided to create Culture Change instead. I had no idea I was putting into motion a writing project that arose then in 2001 and has not let up to this day. Our projects shifted away from the focus on asphalt and exhaust, but that's another story.

Walking alone toward community

Beyond the paving over of the best farmland and critical wildlife habitat, modern society has condoned another value just as disgusting and self-destructive: family relations subject to theft of inheritance via elder abuse and fraud. On the community level, I saw both "values" at work and out of control in Arcata, or "cArcata," my home town from 1991 to 2004. It was bad enough that the people's will was thwarted in their desire for a car-free central Plaza: My own town and the county did almost nothing to stop my family from being reamed by forces in southern California, and indeed there were those in my "community" who wanted my activities shut down and for me to be without a home. They succeeded in the latter only, and I went on to wreak havoc against petroleum dependence in my writing and national presentations. Before I left I was clearly learning that community in cArcata was seriously lacking, as is the case across the U.S. I'm still looking for community. "I'm all right Jack, get your hands off o' my stash" (Pink Floyd's song Money, 1973).

This is not to say there aren't wonderful people in and around Arcata. The problem is that they must follow the mainstream culture in essential, minimal fashion, and their goal of Ecotopia is just Utopian for now. Laws are used across the nation by the rich to manipulate and defeat their foes and poor people in general. So, where's community? Arcata is further and further away from accomplishing it, thanks to gentrification and the dominance of the merchant class

in the town's politics.

The U.S. family eats individually
Across the U.S. the divorce rate has exceeded 50% for several years. It is no mere coincidence that this nation also leads the world in consumerism and failure of community. Another statistic to see how community has ebbed: the single-person household has become the majority case in the U.S. These demographic changes should be like alarm bells telling us something is dreadfully wrong. But nothing at all is being done about it, because the culture is still intact. With dollars and petroleum still flowing, it can keep growing like a cancer. Will it have to reach collapse and also kill the host?

The family is the basis of virtually every human society. When family breaks down, as in the U.S. more than anywhere else by far (I've observed dozens of countries), the fabric of society unravels. Separateness of individuals, and the formation of more dens of thieves (legal or explicitly criminal), subvert through money and our personal isolation the decent attributes that remain of our dominant culture. In many ways it still stands for basic values such as the pursuit of happiness and freedom from/of religion.

Only a couple of generations ago, stable families were the rule. They had more than two generations of family members living under one roof, to share the duties, upbringing and care that keep people alive and happy. Today these functions are increasingly farmed out. Public school was bad enough as a virtual divorce for parent and child, as it lasts most of the day and most of the week, but now we have "pre-school" readily accepted so that economic activity and slavery of the job can come first. While the young are farmed out for strangers to educate and nurture, the elders are put out to pasture (institutionalized) or face loneliness and neglect in their useless palaces or boxes of American Dream claptrap.

Sharing meals and talking, coming to decisions for the family (whether compassionate or dismally autocratic), are hallmarks of social cohesion and solid human relations. But sharing dinner, the only meal of three per day formerly shared, is going by the wayside. First we began to see fast-food chains and convenience foods encroaching with their catering to individualism and throw-away advantage for the unconscious among us. "So she buys an instant cake and she burns her frozen steak" (Mother's Little Helper, the Rolling Stones, 1966). It was supposedly just a cost of progress. But in the last ten years or so there has been a twisted intensification of the trend: many people don't cook or prepare their own food at all anymore -- even to follow the example of the Mother the Stones criticized. Such people are having children of their own and not setting any example by setting the table anymore. They may be buying "Happy Meals" at McDonalds "restaurants" or they may be alternating between picking up some organic delicatessen dishes (no actual dish, but rather paper or plastic), getting "Chinese," or what have you.

These self-impoverished souls invariably possess convenient appliances that, for some additional greenhouse gas emissions, can freeze cook mince puree desiccate decorate and delight. But these eaters may as well be homeless and motherless as they seldom require their machines and doo-dads, or attempt wholesome or fancy meals. The toaster or microwave is an exception, but those gadgets are not for cooking from scratch. Why bother, when you can go out (usually in a car) and get "carry out" vittles (in disposable containers, never one's own re-useable pots). Prepared foods are stashed in a refrigerator where they often rot. Now look at "impoverished Third World peoples": they always cook and eat together, sharing what they have and what they know to prepare and serve without many appliances or disposable paper plates or plastic utensils.

I was brought up being wealthy and to remain advantaged. I was also brought up to change the world, which I now know means protecting and improving my community. I could allow my wealth to be taken away and misused (as was the case), but I was much more opposed to letting the world down or tolerating social injustice. I could always make a buck or make big bucks, or slough that off, but I could not reject participating in social-change movements in the face of crisis (genocidal war in Indo-China and the assault against nature). My father and mother wanted me to do both, for my soul and my material comforts. Some of us are more comfortable with one choice or the other, and rarely get to have both simultaneously. And some of us are dyed-in-the-wool traditionalists: cooking and eating together, and looking out for each other -- essential for our community of a couple or family or collective.

Community starts with two people. If you don't have your blood-family, love the one you're with. There's power in solidarity. Marge Piercy lifted our spirits with her 1980 poem The Low Road (excerpt):

Two people can keep each other
sane...

Three people are a delegation...

With six you can rent a whole house,

eat pie for dinner with no seconds,

and hold a fund raising party.

A dozen make a demonstration.

A hundred fill a hall.

A thousand have solidarity and your own newsletter;

ten thousand, power and your own paper;

a hundred thousand, your own media;

ten million, your own country.

...it starts when you do it again and they said no,

it starts when you say We

and know you who you mean, and each

day you mean one more.

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Further reading:

Frederick Philip Grove, Fruits of the Earth, McClelland and Stewart, Toronto, reprinted 1983

The Low Road, by Marge Piercy:

pacifict.com/ron/Piercy.html

Community Solutions' Eugene R. "Pat" Murphy has just written Plan C – Community Survival Strategies for Peak Oil and Climate Change (New Society Publishers).

communitysolution.org

"Continuity of family for sustainable culture", Culture Change Letter #123, by Jan Lundberg, March 4, 2006:

culturechange.org

"Family cohesion challenged by sprawl and greed", Culture Change magazine #19, by Jan Lundberg:

culturechange.org

Alternatives to materialistic, isolated living:

"A return to tribes", by Jan Lundberg, Culture Change Letter #114:

culturechange.org

"Where's your ecovillage as meltdown approaches?", by Jan Lundberg, Culture Change Letter #139:

culturechange.org